

“*Girls are as good as boys at math.*” That sounds like an encouraging statement, doesn’t it? The sentence tries to send the message that both sexes are equal in their abilities. Girls, it seems to say, are equal to boys in their ability at math. But words are very powerful, and so is the order in which words are used. Because girls are mentioned first and boys are mentioned second, the implication is that being good at math is more common or natural for boys. What do you think? Is it true that word order makes a difference?

Consider another statement: *Boys are as good as girls at talking about their feelings.* You might say, “No way, boys are not good at sharing their feelings.” But most would say that yes, girls are definitely good at this. Because girls are mentioned second, the implication is that it is more natural for girls to talk about their feelings. Would you ever say, “*Girls are as good as boys at talking about their feelings*”? Probably not. It sounds backwards, doesn’t it?

Whenever we make comparisons, we include the more typical, or common object, as the second item in the comparison. We say “tents are like houses” instead of “houses are like tents.” Comparing zebras and horses, we say “zebras are like horses.” No one would ever say “horses are like zebras.” The more typical or common item always comes second.

Words really do shape the world that we live in. The book of Genesis begins with God creating the universe when “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.” God did not create the universe out of nothing, but instead made it out of a dark, formless, watery and chaotic space — something we might imagine as swirling gas or liquid. The poet James Weldon Johnson captured this well when he wrote:

As far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything

Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Genesis makes it clear that God was separate from creation, saying that “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” The Hebrew word for “wind” is *ruah*, which can also be translated “spirit” or “breath.” This word reminds us that God’s spirit can come to earth as a mighty wind, such as on the day of Pentecost found in the book of Acts, or in a gentle breath, as when Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” when he appeared to them in the upper room after his death.

Wind, spirit, breath. All three are important words, at the heart of God’s creative work. On the first day, God created the powerful light that is absolutely essential for life, and God did it using nothing but four words, “Let there be light.” God used a set of words to bring order out of chaos, and light out of darkness. This creative speech of God has continued throughout history, through the words of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

As we witness in the beginning of Genesis, Words can create worlds. In another book called *City of Peace*, a Methodist pastor named Harley Camden speaks about the power of words. “I’m convinced that words create reality,” Harley explains. “It’s a very biblical idea. Think of God creating the world in Genesis, saying ‘Let there be light,’ and there is light. Jesus is described in the New Testament as ‘the Word.’ When Martin Luther King Jr., said, ‘I have a dream,’ people began to see a vision of a new world of equality. Words create reality. Whether we say ‘I love you’ or ‘I hate you’ our words can make a huge difference.

Words have always been critical to the creative work of God. In Genesis, this work continued when “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.” Day and night were created when God called these periods day and night.

Then God went on to use words to create the Earth and seas, vegetation, birds, cattle, and finally humankind. At the end of this creative work, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

In Genesis, God used divine words to create a good world for us to enjoy. But human words do not always have such a positive effect. If a friend gossips about us, we feel hurt. If a stranger yells at us, we feel stung. If people speak to us with disrespect, tensions arise

Words create worlds. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth with words alone, and our speech continues to create the world that we live in. As Christians, we are challenged to take words seriously as we follow Jesus, the One who is the Word of God in human form.

Through history, think of how words have been used in the church to control, diminish or oppress people. “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling,” said the apostle Paul. These words were used to support the institution of slavery. “Women should be silent in the churches,” wrote Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. These words were used to prevent women from preaching and teaching. “Accept the authority of every human institution,” said the apostle Peter. These words gave oppressive governments permission to abuse innocent people.

These words were written in another time and place, but they continue to have a negative impact on life in the 21st century. They do not draw us closer to the God who created the heavens and the earth with a powerful word, and they do not help us to follow Jesus Christ, the human face of God. Clearly, we need better words today.

Our speech should reflect God’s desire for equality between people of every race. “God created humankind in his image,” says the book of Genesis, “in the image of God he created them.” Every human being is created in the image and

likeness of God — whether black, white, brown or any other color. Until we treat everyone as an equally valuable creation of God, at police traffic stops and at other human encounters, we are not being faithful to the word of God.

Genesis also tells us that “male and female [God] created them.” Men and women are made equally in the image and likeness of God, a design for humanity that has been ignored through most of human history. In fact, it was just a little over a century ago, on August 18, 1920, that the 19th Amendment was ratified, giving women in the United States the right to vote. It took far too long for us to grasp the truth of the words “in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” But maybe since male comes first and female comes second, the word order indicates that females are the standard!

Finally, we need words that reflect the truth of Jesus, the Word of God, who became flesh and dwelled among us. “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you,” said Jesus; “for this is the law and the prophets.” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”

Since words create worlds, we need to be using language that communicates the equality of the human beings created by God, as well as words that express the truth, love and mercy of Jesus. On the first day, God brought order out of chaos and light out of darkness. And We can do the same, with the words we speak today, and every day of our lives. Amen.